

# How University Misses a Trick: The Perspective of Bad Design

## Introduction

The current debate on the models of academia struggles with the tension between professors democracy and founder–managerial model of management. Both, the Humboldtian and corporate model have their advantages and disadvantages (Leja, 2013; Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). Over the last few decades, especially significant were the benefits of academic entrepreneurship. For example, society gains the higher quality of life, academics get new opportunities for career development, universities get extra funds, the natural environment is better protected due to new technologies, business partners and the whole economy develop faster and support goals of other policies (Lewandowski, 2013). The criticism of the new model of the university is growing though (Alvesson, Gabriel, Paulsen, 2017; Berg, Seeber, 2017). Unfortunately, the current debate amplifies the arguments from the two opposite positions of the ring. It helps to test the strength of particular arguments, but it does not offer a new angle to see the problem.

The aim of this paper is to offer a new perspective to approach the major stand-points in the debate on the models of the university. In particular, provided a line of argumentation suggests that the assumptions underlying the Humboldtian and corporate model of the university may clash not because the values are mutually exclusive, but due to bad design of the system. This point is developed in the following way. The first section outlines chosen key arguments of the current criticism of academia. The second section outlines the main building blocks of the framework of good design. The third section applies the good design framework to analyse the main points of criticism of academia, hence it outlines the major arguments for the bad design approach. A metaphorical simile made in this section provides a new lens to look at the future of the university, described in the fourth section. The conclusion summarizes the whole line of argumentation.

## 1. Background: Several Points of Current Criticism of Academia

Currently, the dispute over what academia is today and what its future will be, has at least several lines of argumentation (Alvesson et al., 2017; Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016; Zawadzki, 2017). Sułkowski and Zawadzki (2016) outlined the following main points of their criticism: the model of the corporate university, the educational and market fundamentalism, and overwhelming performance indicators. The argument about the corporate university is that in order to improve their functioning universities pursue the corporate model of entrepreneurial organization which turns them into organizations resembling business companies. This shift embraces the management style of the university and the market-oriented diversification of funding streams including paid educational services and harvesting intellectual property rights and other contributions to business (e.g. innovation, spin-offs). This limits the academic autonomy underlying the Humboldtian model of the university (Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). The argument about educational and market fundamentalism emphasizes the erosion of the culture of learning due to the implementation of the corporate model of the university (Arum, Roksa, 2011). On the one hand, in Europe, the university is expected to provide students with a sort of vocational training and prepare them to compete on the labour market (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [ESG], 2015). On the other hand, there is an increasing problem of students passing exams without a sufficient involvement in the learning process (Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). Moreover, the time and effort devoted by the academics to teaching students is too often losing the competition with the time and effort those academics spent on the „publishing game”, namely, trying to get published in the high-ranked journals in order to get some kudos for themselves and for their departments (Alvesson et al., 2017). The argument about performance indicators suggests that the implementation of performance indicators and audit regime in academia has a rather devastating impact on the intellectual freedom, personal relations and solidarity, education process, and social value of research (Jemielniak, Greenwood, 2015; Zawadzki, 2017). Similarly to other public institutions, audit and inspection through indicators contributed to focusing on performance targets and achieving the efficiency savings, but it not contributed to improved response to local needs (Radnor, Buxton, 2012). Sułkowski and Zawadzki (2016) compare such a performance pursuing system to the Foucauldian Panopticon. In academia, it creates an intellectual prison imposing extensive and artificial requirements which are far from real research excellence and long-term consequences of good teaching (Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). Within this vein, Alvesson et al. (2017) made a very strong point that many researchers, at least in social sciences, produce mainly meaningless work. Their criticism pinpoints the strong contribution of power structures and career and reputation priorities in this regard at all: micro, mezzo and macro levels. Another point of criticism is related to feudal relations strengthened by neo-liberalism in academia, especially in Poland (Zawadzki, 2017). In particular,

young scholars' dignity suffers from being exploited by professors for career development, pushed to do overtime, and vulnerable to various power games, among other things. Several points of the criticism of academia imply that there is obviously something wrong with how the system works. In order to see the problem from a new perspective, the framework of good design is introduced in the next section.

## 2. Good Design Framework

The design is a phrase commonly used on a daily basis. It refers to products, services, organizations etc. and has many definitions (Saco, Goncalves, 2008). Usually, the design is about developing concepts how to optimise the function, value, and appearance of products in order to benefit the user and the producer and to enhance sustainability. Design awards criteria could embrace design innovation, the benefit to the user, the benefit to the client, benefit to society, ecological benefit, visual appeal and appropriate aesthetics (Hertenstein, Platt, Veryzer, 2013). Despite that, the good design had been rarely conceptualized in a form allowing to use it as a broader theoretical lens (Hertenstein et al., 2013; Mozota, 2008). Within this vein, Hertenstein, Platt, and Veryzer (2013) developed a research-based framework of good design. Their framework distinguishes two perspectives – customers' and companies'. Customer-related themes embrace:

- aesthetics, meaning beauty, elegance, attractiveness, cleanliness, and sorts of visual aspects;
- functionality, denoting usefulness, ability to complete job or task, working well, quality and value
- customer experience, describing how all sorts of needs are satisfied and what feelings are evoked;
- emotional bond, indicating delight and enduring emotional connection with the consumer, desirability.

In turn, company-related themes encompass:

- business profits/results, meaning profitability and contributing to the objectives, appropriateness to the market and culture norms;
- innovativeness or differentiation, denoting uniqueness, freshness, novelty, distinctiveness;
- brand, describing compliance with brand assumptions and company message, contributing to the history of design, transcending fads;
- appropriate environmentally/ethically, indicating a positive impact on environment and society.

The goodness of design depends heavily on the perspective of the judging body. Thus, this framework outlines basic categories but the meaning should be adapted to the context. Next section tries to capture how the criticism of academia indicated in the first section may be linked to the categories of good design.

### 3. Bad design of Academia: Minotaur missing a trick

The first group of themes describing bad (or good) design pertains to students and staff (narrowed mainly to academics in this argumentation). In terms of functionality, mass education and erosion of culture of learning hinders acquiring critical thinking skills, but at the same time lack of students motivation and dearth of teachers' devotion impedes vocational side of university education (Alvesson et al., 2017; Berg, Seeber, 2017; Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). The analysis of several survey reports<sup>1</sup> from the USA, UK and Australia conducted by external bodies showed that customer experience is something carefully analysed. Comparing to some surveys conducted by universities the general approach of such inquiry remains very similar – it is focused on satisfaction from various services and oriented on the expected success on the labour market, although the particular criteria do differ. The corporate university may not disregard customer experience. Nevertheless, the criteria applied for such evaluations seem rather flat and quantitative, so the reflection afterwards is likely to replicate and strengthen the corporate-like attitude to academic services. In turn, Humboldtian or liberal university values are not reflected by the satisfaction surveys. Moreover, taking the example of the Slow Professor Manifesto (Berg, Seeber, 2017), the student's expectations of pursuing better careers may mismatch the way of teaching preferred by 'Slow Professors'. At the end of a day, even the whole traditional universities may 'disappear' (Ritzen, 2009, p. 196).

The emotional bond with academia seems hardly possible for both, the older professors seeking intellectual autonomy, trapped in the prison of performance indicators, and for younger scholars pushed into many pathologies among which the feudal relations seem salient and most horrible (Alvesson et al., 2017; Jemielniak, Greenwood, 2015; Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016; Zawadzki, 2017). The latter is well expressed by this quote of the anonymous researcher who wrote to „The Guardian”:

By the rules of my own university, my professor shouldn't be listed as an author on many of my papers, but I still add him because he demands it. My professor is in a position of power, and refusing to do so could limit my own career opportunities. He could refuse to assign any master's students to my projects, meaning I have less manpower or refuse to nominate me for prizes. If he is invited to write a review in a very good journal or to be editor of a special issue of a journal, he would be less likely to ask me to collaborate with him. (...) I know of many professors at world-class universities who put their friends on papers, confident that the favour will be returned in due course. There are people listed as authors on several of my papers who were unaware of the work being done. (My professor demands..., 2015).

Successful alumni stories are used to strengthen the image and brand of the university as in the case of Harvard. From the students perspective, the emotional

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<sup>1</sup> For example: <http://www.rsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/StudentOpinionSurvey13.pdf>; <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/national-student-survey-2017-overall-satisfaction-results#survey-answer>; <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/student-experience-survey-2017-results> [accessed 5.05.2018]

bond becomes reduced to their willingness to recommend the university to their colleagues, as expressed in some analysed satisfaction surveys.

Aesthetics of academia are very difficult to assess. The older universities are more likely to cultivate their legacy and use historical premises, decorated with old furniture and painting, for special events. Younger universities, without such a legacy, are more likely to use fancy and modern visual design, both for the interior and exterior. This might reflect the core values of particular academia and strengthen the identity of academics and the brand of the university, to some extent.

Considering the university related themes, the business profits and fulfilling the mission of academia in many cases fail either. Time, as an asset, brings an opportunity either to make money or to make a reflection (Berg & Seeber, 2017). The transfer of knowledge and commercialization of research put business benefits in the first place. Even though innovations contribute to better quality of life, often for those who can afford it. Innovation scoreboards hardly contribute to the development of social innovation which would be widely available for the society at minimal costs (cf. European Commission, 2017). Moreover, the corporate style of academia, in fact, hinders the circulation of knowledge because the researchers are afraid to share their ideas as others may capitalize them (Lewandowski, 2013). In turn, the governments are interested in retaining the control over the society, so critical thinking and emancipation are unlikely to be much appreciated, although necessary for democracy (Pinto, Portelli, 2008). The socio-cultural context is not any better for the cultural mission of the university. Ritzer (2008) speaks about McDonaldization of society. He gives a good example of purposeful eroding important values by mass-media by quoting a vice-president of programming for ABC, who says:

Commercial television programming is designed to attract audiences to the advertisers' messages which surround the programming... Inherent creative aesthetic values [quality] are important, but always secondary (Mankiewicz & Swerdlow, 1978, p. 219 cited in Ritzer, 2008, p. 88).

Forty years after this quote, the majority of the global society, being stupefied by the pop-cultural fodder served by globalised media regularly and for a long time, is heavily unlikely to value an intellectual effort and aesthetics. Those researchers who are interested in the resuscitation of the intellectual life in academia must not only struggle with a wider social context but also must make for a living in the academic system promoting other outputs (Alvesson et al., 2017).

Innovativeness and differentiation from other universities are a dominant of the corporate model. Most common is to differentiate through the position on various ranking lists, however, there are some key disadvantages of such a system (Adler, Harzing, 2009). Moreover, pursuing recognition in the rankings replicates the actions oriented on the rankings. This logic, resembling a vicious circle to some extent, may distract organizational attention from other important areas, like the teaching of critical thinking. Humboldtian universities are likely to differentiate through the peer recognition of the impact of published books, the creation of certain schools of thought, and the kudos of academics and university presses.

Speaking about the brand, creating a ‘good’ one for the university bolsters harvesting market opportunities (Bernasconi, 2005). However, such a brand should adhere to the core university values. Within the marketing strategies, the academic values with the lowest demand for are being deprived of sufficient justification to drive teaching and research. Such scenario is more likely for young universities without sufficient Humboldtian legacy to underpin their academic’s identity, hence their brands. Humboldtian university is either likely to rely on its kudos accumulated throughout the years or to implement partial branding including mixed values. Such a message might be unclear to both groups of stakeholders: those preferring corporate style of academia and those expecting classic Humboldtian university (Berg, Seeber, 2017).

In terms of ethical appropriateness, there are at least few concerns. The corporate university is oriented toward delivering innovation and technologies needed by the society or even humanity. The criticism of university system from the Humboldtian standpoint may hinder the transfer of knowledge and delay important solutions many people are waiting for (Rothaermel et al. 2007, p. 706; Siegel et al., 2007, p. 497). Although, the distribution of benefits is disputable in many cases either, like e.g. medical solutions derived from publicly funded research sold expensively to the society. Currently, the public university is even far from the ideals of social entrepreneurship model (Starnawska & Brzozowska, 2018; Wronka–Pośpiech, 2017). Moreover, paradoxically, entrepreneurial instruments implemented in academia, such as university patents, may even impede industrial innovation (Lewandowski, 2013). In turn, the current corporate model of university expecting academics to fundraise as much as possible and to win in ‘publish or perish’ games, pushes them to publish papers for the sake of publishing. In results, the masses of meaningless works are claimed to be delivered by the current system (Alvesson et al., 2017).

Presented arguments are grasped in table 1. Although the presented line of argumentation is far from being comprehensive, the point was just to depict the curiosity of the design.

**Table 1.** Several aspects of Bad Design of Academia

Good (bad) design themes	Humboldtian or liberal half	Corporate half
Aesthetics	Old portraits and furniture usually only in headquarters and historic buildings.*	Fancy and modern visual design usually mainly in the headquarters and public space.*
Functionality	Pursuing elite teaching and developing critical thinking; empowering citizens through critical thinking; failed due to mass education and erosion of the culture of learning. (Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016).	Pursuing educational services for students preparing for labour market; often failed due to lack of involvement of students and teachers playing ‘publish or perish’ game. (Alvesson et al., 2017; Sułkowski & Zawadzki, 2016).

Good (bad) design themes	Humboldtian or liberal half	Corporate half
Customer experience	Surveys do not consist relevant measures pertaining e.g. to critical thinking, student–teachers community (Survey reports). ‘Slow Professors’, although ‘taking back the intellectual life to university’ (Berg & Seeber, 2017, p. x), may not appeal to students expectations regarding labour–oriented education.	Students experience measured through various criteria, however, inquiries usually embrace only satisfaction measures (Survey reports).
Emotional bond	Pursuing community and more individual interpersonal relations; failed due to mass education and erosion of the culture of learning. Beloved intellectual freedom limited through performance indicators regime (Jemielniak & Greenwood, 2015; Sułkowski & Zawadzki, 2016).	Pursuing indicators such as „would you recommend your university” in rankings or surveys (Survey reports); Developing alumni community to track the careers and to promote university through success stories ( <a href="https://alumni.harvard.edu/">https://alumni.harvard.edu/</a> ); Academic feudalism, overtime and other dysfunctions experienced by young academic staff (Zawadzki, 2017) (My professor demands. . . , „Guardian”, 5 <sup>th</sup> June).
Business profits or results	The system does not promote critical reflection on the socio–cultural environment and initiating changes (Alvesson et al. 2017), which in addition may be perceived as having small value by the labour market, political elites and society.	Enhancing mainly industrial and business innovation (European Commission, 2017). the circulation of knowledge among academic may decrease (Lewandowski, 2013).
Innovativeness or differentiation	Differentiation through the schools of thought, recognition of the impact of published books and kudos of university presses.	Quality of services according to the rankings, but it fosters the disadvantages of this system (Adler & Harzing, 2009); it becomes a vicious circle. For example in Poland for a couple of years universities use fancy names for offered majors.
Brand	Accumulated social image, rather not managed professionally; built through interpersonal relations of professors within the community; an occasional appearance in the media.*	Better university brands enable better opportunities for consulting and higher rates in the market (Bernasconi, 2005), but such a market–oriented strategy neglects the core non–merchandiseable values of academia (Berg, Seeber, 2017).
Appropriate environmentally or ethically	Conflicting opinions over the university system’s mission could hinder the transfer of knowledge and delay potential socially important discoveries (Rothaermel et al. 2007, p.706; Siegel et al., 2007, p.497).	Publishing meaningless works due to the system rewarding quantity and unnecessary use of difficult and sophisticated language (Alvesson et al., 2017; Berg , Seeber, 2017); University patenting may be an impediment for industrial innovation (Lewandowski, 2013).

\* Presumed statements. Survey reports comprise a few students satisfaction surveys from Australia, UK, and the USA.

Source: own elaboration.

The perspective of bad design offers a new lens to notice a mismatch between the two models of the university. Moreover, such a perspective encourages a bit hazardous simile, that the model of contemporary university resembles the Minotaur – the half-man-half-bull beast. In brief, the myth of the Minotaur says that Poseidon, the god of the sea, gave the beautiful snow-white bull to Minos, the king of Crete, as a sign of support the king asked for. Minos was supposed to kill the bull, but he kept it. This disobedience made Poseidon to seek punishment, so the deity made Pasifea, Minos's wife, to fall in love with the bull. The fruit of this love – the offspring – was the Minotaur. In case of the university, flouting the genuine purpose of academia and pursuing blindly the economic growth through the triple-helix model (Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff, 1997), amalgamated both the Humboldtian and corporate model, and created a badly designed 'monster'. Universities, in many cases, turned into strange organizations, full of contradicting values, feudal relations, too tight bureaucratic regulations, all unpleasant to academics, students and administration. So what the future of the Minotaur would be?

#### 4. The future of Minotaur

In the future university is predicted to turn mostly into a corporate, private model based on market-driven self-financing, an active player in the ecosystem of the triple-helix model, selling both the educational services to the student-customers and the copyrighted or licensed knowledge or technology resulting from very specialized research to the business-customers (Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, Terra, 2000; Sułkowski, Zawadzki, 2016). The market-driven management will deprive the university of its autonomy. Such one ended scenario is arguable, and few models of the university may exist (Leja, 2013). The Minotaur metaphor derived through the analytical lens of the good design framework prompts to outline the three following scenarios.

**Deviation (feed the Minotaur), if the status quo is maintained.** Within this scenario, the university will continue to be an unpleasant place, torn between contradicting values and pressures. New reforms of the educational system are likely to replicate existing structure, even unintentionally. It seems a somewhat temporary solution, though. Although it may probably last for decades in some cases, at the end of the day the minotaur universities are likely to lose the strong market competition with their fully corporate counterparts, hence the 'corporate halves' will atrophy slowly. The most entrepreneurial academics are likely to be seduced by the development possibilities offered by corporate universities. In turn, the spirit of the 'Humboldtian halves' will slowly evaporate either. The most entrepreneurial academic thinkers are likely to abandon the sinking ship and pursue an 'old-fashioned' academic freedom in the social universities.



**Dissolution (kill the Minotaur), if the criticism and dissatisfaction evolve.** This developmental path is likely to uncouple the non-matching parts. The corporate university will gather career developing academics and will master its economic and social value through applicable solutions and technologies in medicine, materials etc. In this regard, corporate university will strongly collaborate with business in terms of research-to-retail strategy and vocational teaching. However, those who do not fit in the corporate model, especially in social sciences and humanities, will turn towards social university, likely in the form of non-governmental organizations applying governance style of management. It is already happening to some high schools and secondary schools to some extent. Maybe, some researchers will even come up with organizing a typical vocational college but, manifesting a deliberate ironic approach, for humanities.

**Deconstruction (fix the Minotaur), if an appropriate reflection, reforms and instruments are employed.** The ministries of education will properly redesign the entire system of higher education instead of applying punctual simple solutions, such as increasing state funding for interdisciplinary research through dedicated programs offered by national agencies, for example. Leja (2013) proposed a socially responsible university embracing both, liberal and corporate model. The reform must pursue sustainability as other public service organizations (Osborne, Radnor, Kinder, Vidal, 2015). Therein, universities should retain both the intellectual freedom and socio-economic notion but in a synergy-pursuing approach. As Alvesson et al. (2017) emphasize, the meaningful research in social sciences may and should support responsible teaching. Whenever various propositions of change are mentioned and described, the presupposition of good design is made. For example Sułkowski & Zawadzki (2016, pp. 120–121) claim:

We have to go back to the true meaning of education as Paideia: to recreate the true desire for knowledge and true interaction with knowledge, which can empower the human. Knowledge arises from profoundly salient personal experience with text and a systematic deliberative dialogue with other people – this is what makes up the contents of symbolic culture allowing insight into the complexity of the reality, the development of critical reflection, imagination and a sense of quality.

In turn, Alvesson et al. (2017, p. 85) pointed out: “We see a set of moves in the right direction as a more important than utopian blueprints and wishful thinking”.

The major point is that it is the design of the solutions that matter. How the values and performance of liberal university will be re-joined with its corporate counterparts is the crucial question. Applying design-thinking approach on policy and university levels has some potential to mitigate detrimental performance measurement and employ empathy in rethinking the trade-offs between stakeholders’ interests within both liberal and corporate approach (Design Commission, 2013; Lewandowski, 2018; Thoelen et al., 2015). The solutions are unknown, but at least a method for such a circumstance exists and could be used.

## Conclusions

An increasing criticism of the corporate model of academia is a fact, as is the usability of this model for economic growth. On the one hand, the managerial model, market orientation, the regime of performance indicators and organizational pathologies are highlighted. On the other hand, the benefits of academic entrepreneurship fostered by the corporate model of the university are often enumerated either. The ideal–typical models of Humboldtian and corporate university are in fact amalgamated. The perspective of good design, applied in this study, shows how these ideals interact with each other and result in a bad design.

The clash of values and interests turned many contemporary universities into ‘Minotaur–like’ organizations. All major stakeholders suffer from the bad design. Students get an inadequate education. Academic don’t want to teach because they need to fundraise and publish in the high–ranked journals but publish a lot of meaningless works or contribute to business development in a “from research to retail” manner. Industry and the pace of economic growth suffer from bureaucratic impediments and distrust among academic entrepreneurs. The society is deprived of critically thinking class what puts democracies into crisis (as the political scene in the USA and Europe recently showed). Importantly, the inevitability of this clash becomes more and more apparent. This paper, sticking to the simile with Minotaur, predicts three future scenarios: deviation, dissolution, or deconstruction.

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